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ABSTRACT

This brief describes the challenges facing urban school boards, reviews the governance alternatives being tried in various cities, and highlights some related considerations. The challenges school boards face vary, but some themes are common across urban areas: (1) an ill-defined role can impair effectiveness; (2) competing political interests can hinder a board's impact; (3) board selection processes can limit a board's representational nature; and (4) boards are constrained by the information they receive. A number of board reform efforts have emerged in districts across the United States. The first, role reform, more clearly defines the line between policy and operational decision making, and clarifies expectations for staff to diminish micromanagement. Electoral reform changes the way in which school board members are elected. Mayoral control is another reform approach that places more responsibility in the hands of the mayor as external actor for school district decisions. By itself, strong, positive leadership on the local school board is seldom enough to overcome the systemic problems that plague many large urban school districts. However, the critical role of the school board is undeniable, and worth continued examination. (Contains 33 endnotes and 22 references.) (SLD)

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Leading in Difficult Times: Are Urban School Boards Up to the Task?

As urban school systems across the U.S. strive to meet expectations of high achievement for all students, attention increasingly focuses on how they are structured and governed. The quality of leadership is a key issue, but as one reform effort after another falls short of its aims, many have begun asking whether even the most talented and committed leaders can surmount barriers that may be inherent in the systems' very architecture.

At the heart of school governance is the school board. From the inception of public education in the U.S., the school board — as the body representing the community's electorate — has been charged with ensuring that schools are serving students as they should. Under today's definition of accountability, that means setting high standards and ensuring that all students in the system achieve well under those standards. The issues involved have led to contentious board meetings in districts of every size. But in a number of big cities — where politics, demographics, and the sheer size of the school district and its budget make the challenges more complex — a focal point of debate has become the board itself. An array of stakeholders in these cities suggest that the school board as traditionally defined is ill-matched to the task that needs accomplishing.

Some district reformers contend that requiring school board candidates to have greater experience and board members to have training could strengthen a board's effectiveness.[1] Others propose that unless the very structure and role of school boards are changed, even the most capable leaders may be unable to improve student achievement.[2] Several cities have already enacted school board change, in some cases radical change. These actions are highly controversial and raise fundamental questions about the bounds of democratic institutions.

Because reform efforts have only recently begun, research on their impact is limited and inconclusive. But for those interested in following this trend — policymakers, reformers, communities, and others concerned about the performance of our urban schools — this brief describes the challenges facing urban school boards; reviews the governance alternatives being tried in various cities, and highlights some related considerations.

Challenges Facing Urban School Boards

Though reports of challenges facing school boards differ in their particulars from city to city, some themes are common across urban areas. These include:

An ill-defined role can impair board effectiveness. Many boards are unclear about their role and how it differs from that of the superintendent.[3] Constituents, in turn, are unsure to whom they should bring their concerns. The confusion is compounded by constantly shifting reform agendas, as well as by growing numbers of federal and state mandates that must be met even as districts develop and pursue their own local goals. For example, when states touted site-based management as a way to shift decision-making to those closest to students, little was said about the board's role vis-à-vis the new responsibilities of school site leaders.[4]

And when federal Title I statutes changed to include assessment and reporting requirements, these were not necessarily aligned with local and/or state requirements for some districts. In so complex a decision-making environment, it is not surprising to find boards accused of micromanagement or disjointed leadership, warranted or not.

Competing political interests can hinder a board's impact. School boards' responsibilities are considerable. Their job is to ensure a sound education for the community's children, and in some large districts, this entails overseeing a multi-million- or -billion-dollar budget. Yet board elections are characterized by low voter turnout and a widespread lack of voter familiarity with candidates[5] — conditions that allow organized special interest groups to exert significant influence on school board elections.

Because the school board holds sway over issues of importance to traditional interest groups — such as the teacher contract to the teacher unions — such

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groups have an important stake in who gets elected. Big-money campaigns can result. Other interest groups may be less deep-rooted and may have fewer resources, but still be influential at election time, such as those advocating prayer or sex education in school. Choice advocates — whether supporting public charter schools or private vouchers — are also growing in number and effectiveness. The generally low voter turnout for board elections allows any of these groups to have greater influence than they otherwise might.

Beyond the election process, clashing special interests can severely hobble board members' ability to work as a cohesive group.[6] For example, ethnic groups may be competing for the same resources. Similarly, civil rights advocates working to desegregate schools can be at loggerheads with those interested in preserving neighborhood schools, even if the schools are segregated due to housing patterns.

The board selection processes can limit a board's representational nature. Whether school board candidates are elected at large, by area, or by cumulative vote, the goal is to give local constituents a voice.[7] However, the frequency of low voter turnout, coupled with the role of special interests mentioned above, has diminished real citizen voice. Voter apathy toward school board elections may have many sources. Some research suggests that low turnout is evidence of citizens who have little interest in school matters or, if interested, don't feel their vote will affect the outcome anyway.[8] Irrespective of the reason, some reformers are concerned about the potential results: a school board that does not represent the demographics and values of the larger community[9] and, therefore, is not held accountable by large segments of that community. In working to amend traditional board election systems, these reformers are hoping to instill greater board accountability by engaging a larger portion of the public, first in the election itself, then in the broader district decision-making process.

Boards are constrained by the information they receive. Poor data systems and lax reporting requirements to date have hindered board effectiveness. This will become more of an issue now that new federal statutes emphasize the collecting and monitoring of longitudinal data for school and student performance. A comprehensive data system capable of collecting such information is particularly critical in urban districts because of their high student transience and mobility rates. To make sound decisions about improving low-performing schools, boards need accurate, high-quality data as well as training in how to interpret and use it.

Urban School Board Reform Efforts

A number of board reform efforts have emerged in districts across the nation: role reform, electoral reform, and mayoral control. These approaches vary with their unique definitions of what primarily limits board effectiveness.

ROLE REFORM

Large-entity decision-making has two distinct parts: organizational and operational. In school districts, the board is the organizational leader, while the superintendent oversees operations. This arrangement by no means excludes the superintendent from helping to develop the vision for district improvement. But the size and complexity of an urban school district require that the board focus on district-level policy decisions, while empowering the superintendent and holding him or her accountable for translating these policies into action. The superintendent, in turn, may empower a cadre of staff — principals and teachers — to carry out school and classroom improvement, but these staff work within the policy bounds established by the board.

The goal of role reform is to provide some guidance for board members who want to more clearly define the line between policy and operational decision-making and govern according to this distinction. Expectations for staff become clear, and micromanagement is diminished.

One way to approach role reform is to have board members commit to being a policy board. Governance theorist and consultant John Carver developed the Policy Governance approach, currently the best-known method of policy board reform. From broad experience with

POTENTIAL BOARD PITFALLS

When challenges of role definition, power politics, selection processes, and/or inadequate data are not addressed, the following problems can result:

Micromanagement. Without a clear role, school board members often blur the line between governing a system and operating it.[10] District staff contend that board members should focus on long-term policy decisions and leave the day-to-day operations to the superintendent and central office staff.

Lack of commitment to a unified reform vision. Political and structural constraints (e.g., an unclear role, ineffective selection processes, and weak data infrastructure) impede the ability of board members to coalesce around a single reform agenda.[11] Without a clear sense of what they are responsible to do, board members may be more likely to align themselves with powerful special interest organizations that have established agendas and can potentially propel a board member to higher political office. These narrow constituent concerns cloud the larger picture of academic success for all students.

Frequent, destabilizing changes in policy direction. When board members have disparate visions for district reform and different levels of knowledge and expertise, it becomes very difficult to maintain a consistent policy direction. District reforms will come and go and staff will take each new reform less seriously. This makes it difficult to mobilize the system to improve teaching and learning.

nonprofit boards, Carver concludes that the most competent members are often unable to overcome the structural problems of boards.

By employing Policy Governance, board members take time to identify what types of decisions are in their purview as trustees of sustained school district progress. By the same token, board members identify what kinds of decisions they will defer to district management or staff.[12] Some specific steps boards may take in adopting Policy Governance include:

- Developing a test for what makes a policy decision different from an operational one.
- Holding the superintendent accountable for clear and measurable district goals while allowing the superintendent to set performance goals for district and school staff.
- Developing policies for handling constituent concerns that reflect the board's responsibility to all students rather than to powerful special interests.

Supporters contend that role reform brings much needed clarity to the function of school boards. By their very nature, policy boards provide their own internal set of checks and balances because board members are accountable to each other for their decisions. Boards have opted to exercise this internal accountability in different ways, including self-policing members' activities by applying sanctions to those who do not adhere to the reform tenets,[13] laying down guidelines articulating what policy decision-making does and does not include, and measuring each agenda item against how it reflects a focus on student achievement.[14]

However, reports from nonprofit organizations using Policy Governance indicate that the stringent task differentiation that policy board reform may require can result in fewer opportunities for central office staff and board members to collaborate on setting policy and operations standards. There is also no evidence yet that ties such a reform directly to improved student and school performance in large, urban districts.

In addition, role reform relies heavily on individual board members to commit to governing in a way that does not confuse their role with that of the superintendent or other district actors.[15] Critics suggest that school board members are not likely to make this transition on their own and will adopt policy board procedures only if required by state legislation.[16]

But several district boards and county boards of education have implemented Policy Governance, as did the Dallas Independent School District, which was troubled by the operational interference of members who, for example, met with principals and involved themselves in personnel decisions.[17]

The Council of the Great City Schools, whose membership includes urban districts with the largest enrollments in the nation, has identified sharpening or demarcating the board's role as a prerequisite for reform. The Council's recent report advocates a new board role wherein "a new board majority (or other governing unit) focuses on policy-level decisions that support improved student achievement rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district."[18]

This recommendation emerged from an examination of four urban districts — Houston, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina), and a portion of the Chancellor's District in New York City — that had recently showed growth in overall student performance, narrowed the achievement gap between white and minority students, and improved at a more rapid rate than the state average.[19]

Several state school board associations have developed their own governance standards and training programs. For example, the California School Boards Association's Professional Governance Standards provide its members with guidelines on a range of key topics, including how to establish an effective board structure focused on student achievement, how to work cooperatively with the superintendent, and what the key jobs of a school board are.

Moreover, the national Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) provides policy board training and assistance. In fact, most advocacy efforts on behalf of policy boards have been based on a 1986 IEL report that is considered the most complete existing study of school boards.[20]

ELECTORAL REFORM

Historically, school boards were established to ensure local access to education decision-making, but concerns about fair and equitable representation emerged as early as the 1950s. At the center of the debate is the traditional at-large system of electing school board members, in which candidates are selected from anywhere in the district.

Electoral reform suggests that such a system can disenfranchise diverse constituencies of parents, communities, and others most directly involved with public schools because these groups are often unable to amass the numbers necessary to significantly influence election results.

At-Large Voting. In this system, school board candidates can reside anywhere in the district, and voters select candidates to represent the whole district. Representation issues surface primarily in large, urban districts where housing and wealth segregation contribute to school boards composed mainly of members from distinct middle- and upper-class white locales.

In a frequently used hypothetical example, if residents of a city with a 20 percent ethnic or racial minority population used an at-large system to elect their five board members, and if residents voted for candidates of their own race or ethnicity, every minority candidate would lose by a four-to-one margin.[21]

As recently as 1998, school board member responses to surveys conducted by the *American School Board Journal* and Virginia Tech University indicate that board memberships do not reflect the demographics of the electorate.[22]

- 68 percent of board members reported an income of at least $60,000, with 28 percent of that group making more than $100,000 annually;
- 75 percent held a four-year college degree and 46 percent had earned graduate degrees; and
- 80 percent stated that they were white; 6.5 percent African American; and 3.1 percent Hispanic.

In many urban areas, as organized groups of district voters — specifically those residing in lower-income and/or minority sectors — have begun to feel further disenfranchised from their school boards, they have pushed to reform the structure of school board elections. Because most districts have traditionally used an at-large voting system, electoral reform has usually consisted of shifting from at-large voting to either election-by-area or cumulative voting.

Election-by-Area. Many opponents of the at-large system prefer, instead, a single-member district system under which board members would be elected from distinct geographic areas in the district. Theoretically, this alternate election method would equalize the access to and composition of school boards along racial and ethnic lines in a way that at-large elections do not guarantee. (Congruent with this logic, in 1967 Congress adopted legislation mandating that U.S. congressional representatives be selected using an election-by-area system.)

Although districts shifting from at-large to single-member voting have experienced greater racial and ethnic representation, this voting system is advantageous only for groups that are geographically concentrated and can muster the political power to have districts redrawn in their favor. Its value is more problematic when any minority group — whether defined by race, ethnicity, special interest, or any other factor — is not concentrated in a single geographic area and/or is not large enough to be influential even if it is concentrated.[23]

In the same vein, the approach is less useful when several geographically concentrated minority groups compete for favorable redistricting. One such case occurred in the 1991 New York City Council redistricting effort when Hispanics, Asian Americans, and African Americans were all pushing for different redistricting plans. Another critique of election-by-area argues that this method obstructs decision-making focused on the good of the district as a whole. Area interests and narrow thinking can proliferate.[24]

CUMULATIVE VOTING. A newer adaptation of the at-large system may present a way to avoid the limitations of single-member districting while correcting the shortfalls of at-large elections. Cumulative voting enables even the smallest organized group to pool its votes to affect the composition of school boards. This approach allows each voter to either spread his or her votes evenly among the candidates or concentrate the votes on one candidate or some small number of candidates.

For example, in a district electing seven board members, a voter might allocate one vote each to the seven candidates, allocate three-and-a-half votes to each of two candidates, or give all seven votes to a single candidate. This method would enable a small contingent of people — school nurses and counselors, for example — to pool their votes behind a single candidate with some reasonable hope of success.

Small-district school boards in Illinois, New Mexico, South Dakota, Alabama, and Texas have adapted their at-large systems to include cumulative voting. With its May 2000 school board elections, Amarillo, Texas became the largest U.S. jurisdiction, and one of 57 Texas communities, to use cumulative voting.[25] Many advocates agree that cumulative voting "protects minorities from tyranny without giving privileges to a minority of the moment."[26] However, just as with single-member district voting, cumulative voting can result in fractious boards that are unwilling or unable to unify around a shared vision for district improvement.

While at-large elections continue to be used in a majority of districts nationwide, it is important to recognize the efforts of several districts that have set out in search of something different. As yet, unfortunately, there is no research to show whether these methods directly affect teaching and learning in the districts adopting them.

MAYORAL CONTROL

In a number of urban districts, people are looking to a third and significantly more controversial approach to reforming school boards: mayoral control. As its name suggests, mayoral control occurs when a city mayor assumes authority for a district lying within the city limits. Mayors assume one or a combination of several powers: (a) they appoint part of or the whole school board, (b) they select the superintendent; or (c) they become the primary decision-maker in a district, leaving the board with an advisory role.

Reformers suggest that because the public sees school boards as amorphous, distant institutions, school boards cannot be effective organizational leaders. Rather than seek remedy in restructured school boards, these reformers advocate shifting authority from the board to an external actor who can engage stakeholders and use their input to inform district decisions, namely the city mayor.

Several versions of mayoral control have appeared in urban districts nationwide. While mayoral systems differ by city, researchers identify four levels of control:[27]

- LOW. Mayors have either threatened mayoral control to spur district improvement or supported slates of board candidates in an effort to influence policy in districts where city and school district boundaries are not congruent. Used in Akron, Ohio; Los Angeles and Sacramento, California.
- LOW/MODERATE. District voters approve a ballot initiative to give mayors the authority to appoint a portion of the school board. Power is shared with city electorates, state governors, or borough presidents. Used in Oakland, California; Washington, D.C.; and Baltimore.

- **Moderate**. State legislation allows city mayors to appoint some or all of the local school board; however, mayors have chosen to empower district superintendents to act on their behalf. Used in Detroit.
- **High**. Mayors have exclusive power — given by state legislators — to oversee the district, including appointing school board members. Mayors have used this power to alter the structure, mission, and resources available to their school districts. Board members act as advisors to the city mayor, who is the primary decision-maker. Used in Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, and New York City.

In cities that have low and low/moderate levels of mayoral control, board members continue to make most of the decisions traditional to school boards; however, the mayor may have taken steps to place his or her candidates in board positions. In cities with higher levels of mayoral control, board members act in an advisory capacity to the mayor, who will either empower the district superintendent to make operational decisions or look to a mayoral appointee to carry out these decisions.

Supporters suggest mayoral control creates a direct link between a city's children's services and education. City mayors not only have access to additional funding streams, but they are in positions to establish collaborations between city agencies and district offices that offer similar or complementary services to the city's students.

Additionally, the mayor can make appointments based on a particular mix of expertise needed for that city's school board, ensuring that there is a balance of education, management, operational, community, and district experience. Finally, a single government official is held accountable for the city's K-12 education.[28] District constituents can look to the mayor rather than to a collection of board members whose names they may or may not be able to recall. By shifting the authority over a district's governing body, voters enable the mayor to be responsible for what happens in their schools.

Opponents claim, however, that such a shift leaves unchecked the potential for excessive or corrupt interference, the very reason school boards came into being.[29] Others note that, given a mayor's numerous responsibilities, he or she may not have the knowledge or time to adequately lead district reform, limiting how accountable the mayor can be for education.[30]

Some opponents worry that locating district accountability in a single political actor increases the opportunity for state officials to intervene or take over low-performing urban districts. For example, a mayor who has control over appointing a majority of the school board may see this as independent power that can be transferred to the state in exchange for greater resources. In 1997, for instance, Baltimore's mayor traded his authority to appoint the district school board for $203 million in state education funding.[31]

Most reformers agree that it would be virtually impossible to directly tie distinct improvements in classroom practice to governance changes like mayoral control. However, Kirst (2002) highlights evidence of the positive impact mayoral control has had in cities across the nation, noting that centralized authority has hastened curricular changes and facilities improvements in Washington, D.C. and Cleveland. In any case, in districts with mayoral control, Kirst reports no indication that people want to revert to a more traditional form of district oversight. In fact, Cleveland voters reauthorized mayoral control indefinitely by 70 percent in November 2002.

In a six-city study[32] that focused on system changes resulting from shifts in district governance, three of the cities (Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia) were experimenting with mayoral control. The study found that these three districts experienced moderately encouraging impacts from the structural changes. While all three showed some increase in political support of district reforms and greater alignment of their school and state accountability systems, none experienced a decrease in dropout rate, improvement in secondary student test scores, or a reduction in the gap between white and minority students. Boston and Chicago had a slight improvement in the coordination of city and school services, but did not approach the much higher predictions of advocates.

Considerations

Urban districts need policy stability and consistency to make and sustain difficult changes.

With numerous and sometimes conflicting policy decisions flooding school boards from state and federal offices,

boards can find themselves navigating new requirements that blur their focus on local decision-making. To the extent that policymakers at all levels can be clearer and more consistent in their dictates, local school boards may be better able to generate a single plan for district reform that both includes clear local objectives and folds in state and federal priorities.

Context is critical.

In considering board reform of any sort, it is critical to pay attention to the historical and educational context of the particular city and district. Reformers must consider the district size, whether all the communities served by the district are within a single city's jurisdiction, and the nature of political interest groups in the district.

For example, in a district like Los Angeles, which spans more than 16 city jurisdictions, the question of mayoral takeover would become, "Which mayor?" If a district's school board has a history of micromanaging, policy board reform may be the best option for improving teaching and learning. If, instead, the major challenge relates to how members are elected instead of how they operate, an electoral reform strategy may be a better choice.

Finally, organizations representing the interests of district employees, the metropolitan business sector, and ethnic communities may view some of these reforms as having a potentially negative effect on their power or constituencies. Therefore, bringing together a multiplicity of stakeholders and being clear about the value any one reform holds for a particular district is vital.

Many school boards may require state and federal assistance to strengthen their data infrastructure.

A growing emphasis on annual and longitudinal performance indicators means that district leaders must establish reliable and meaningful data systems. Given the challenges of instituting such systems in a big urban district, urban school boards may need financial help as well as technical assistance in such areas as the use of data tools to compare their performance results to those of similar districts.

School board reform is not a panacea.

While governance is critically important for any comprehensive reform, a school system transformation strategy clearly must also address a host of other issues, ranging from teacher and principal quality to resource use to reform fatigue. Yet the role of school boards is critical. It deserves more analysis and research, particularly to gain a clearer understanding of how school board policy and practice affect student achievement.[33]

Conclusions

Many questions remain about improving the effectiveness of school boards in large urban districts. With districts now expected to implement expansive federal education policies, the job of school boards grows only more complex and the questions more urgent. This review of current efforts to improve school board performance highlights the need both for more research on how board decision-making affects student achievement and for evaluations of past and current school board reforms as they relate to school and student improvement.

By itself, strong, positive leadership on the local school board is seldom enough to overcome the systemic problems that plague many large, urban school districts in this country. Yet its critical role is undeniable and worth continued examination.

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1 Carol, Cunningham, Danzberger, Kirst, McCloud, & Usdan (1986); Goodman & Zimmerman (2000).
2 National School Boards Foundation (1999).
3 Carol et al. (1986); Danzberger & Usdan (1994); Todras (1993).
4 Education Commission of the States (1999); Ziebarth (1999).
5 Goodman & Zimmerman (2000).
6 Carol et al. (1986); Danzberger (1994); Danzberger & Usdan (1994).
7 Goodman & Zimmerman (2000); Land (2002).
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